



Quintero, José (1924-1999)

by Linda Rapp

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José Quintero had a long and successful career as a director and later as a teacher, but his greatest accomplishment and contribution to the theater was reviving interest in the works of Eugene O'Neill. When O'Neill's plays were in danger of slipping into obscurity it was Quintero who once again put them before the public in well-received productions that brought them the recognition that they so richly deserved.

A founder of the legendary Circle in the Square Theatre, Quintero pioneered in the off-Broadway movement of the 1950s, which continues to this day. During a long career he directed and often produced some of the most important theatrical works staged in the United States, sometimes off-Broadway. Fittingly, an off-Broadway theater is now named in his honor.

The man who resurrected the works of America's Pulitzer and Nobel Prize-winning playwright, O'Neill, was, perhaps improbably, Panamanian. José Benjamín Quintero arrived into the world on October 15, 1924 in Panama City. He would later be struck by the fact that his birthdate was only one day different from that of O'Neill, who was born October 16, 1888.

The Quintero family was financially comfortable, but Quintero did not enjoy a happy childhood in the strict Catholic household ruled by his domineering father.

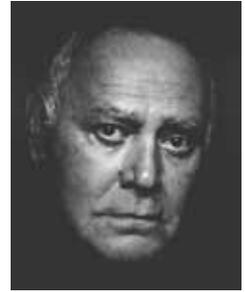
Quintero stated that from the very moment of his birth he was "branded a disaster" by his father, who was hoping for a daughter after two sons.

According to Quintero, his youth was a series of failures to live up to his father's expectations. He recalled that his father took him to a brothel when he was fifteen, but he could not perform. He further disappointed his father by failing to earn the grades necessary to pursue a career in medicine. At the time of his graduation from a Panama City Catholic high school he was instead "known for his ability to decorate altars and for his resolve to see every Bette Davis movie that came to town."

The family sent him to Los Angeles City College in 1943. After a year he returned to Panama with the plan of looking for work. When he did not settle into a career, however, he decided to continue his education in Los Angeles and transferred to the University of California. There, Quintero became interested in working in the theater. Upon learning of this, his father sent him a check for five hundred dollars and a note saying that he considered his son dead.

Quintero did not communicate with his family again for seven years. He would subsequently state that the rejection freed him because he no longer had to fear failure in his family's estimation.

After completing his bachelor's degree in 1948 Quintero studied briefly at the Goodman Theater Dramatic School in Chicago before heading to New York.



A portrait of José Quintero by Stathis Orphanos.
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With a number of other idealistic young people Quintero formed the Loft Players. Quintero's 1974 memoir recounts the hand-to-mouth existence that the members of the company endured in Woodstock, New York while mounting productions of a wide variety of plays, including *The Glass Menagerie* by Tennessee Williams, whose work Quintero greatly admired and with which he would subsequently be closely associated.

Quintero and a few of the members of the company went back to New York City, where, again on a shoestring budget, they managed to rent a Greenwich Village club and transform it into a theater in the round, which they named Circle in the Square. They staged their first play, William Berney and Howard Richardson's *Dark of the Moon*, in 1951. The production was favorably received and enjoyed an eight-week run.

After this professional success Quintero traveled back to Panama, where he and his relatives were reconciled. He found his family in some disarray, however, as his father had moved in with a young mistress and various other personal dramas were in progress.

When Quintero returned to New York he and the Circle in the Square company revived Tennessee Williams' *Summer and Smoke*. The production was a rousing success, bringing respectability to off-Broadway venues and making leading lady Geraldine Page a star. Quintero became close friends with Williams and also with Thornton Wilder, whose *Our Town* he directed in 1959.

In the course of his career Quintero directed over seventy productions by a variety of writers, including Truman Capote, Brendan Behan, Jean Genet, Jean Cocteau, and Sir Noël Coward, but he is best known for his work with the plays of Williams and, especially, Eugene O'Neill.

Although O'Neill had won three Pulitzer Prizes and the 1936 Nobel Prize for literature, during the last decade of his life critics tended to dismiss his pieces as dated, and his popularity declined. Following his death in 1953 his widow and literary executor, Carlotta Monterey O'Neill, refused to allow any further productions of his plays.

In early 1956, however, Quintero was able to secure Mrs. O'Neill's permission to stage *The Iceman Cometh*. The production at the Circle in the Square, which starred Jason Robards, drew rave reviews from the critics and was enthusiastically received by audiences.

Quintero had quickly become close friends with Mrs. O'Neill and would remain so for the rest of her life. After the success of *The Iceman Cometh* she allowed him to present the American premiere of *A Long Day's Journey into Night*.

The play, which starred Robards and Fredric March, was a triumph. Quintero won a Tony Award for the production, and O'Neill was posthumously awarded the 1957 Pulitzer Prize for drama.

In the course of his career Quintero directed O'Neill plays nineteen times. Among the most successful of these productions was a 1973 revival of *A Moon for the Misbegotten*, for which he won another Tony Award.

Although Quintero worked primarily in the theater, he occasionally directed radio and television productions as well as two films, *Medea* (1959), an adaptation of the Euripides play starring Judith Anderson and Colleen Dewhurst, and *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone* (1961), based on a novella by Tennessee Williams.

With a screenplay by Arthur Laurents, and starring Vivien Leigh as an aging actress and Warren Beatty as her youthful gigolo, *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone* has a strong undercurrent of homoeroticism. In addition, it brought Lotte Lenya an Academy Award nomination as Best Supporting Actress.

Quintero identified strongly with O'Neill and even claimed to have been visited by his ghost. Like O'Neill he suffered from alcoholism, but in the mid-1970s, at the urging of his life partner, Nicholas Tsacrios, he successfully underwent treatment to overcome his addiction.

In 1987 Quintero faced another obstacle: throat cancer required the removal of his larynx. He feared that the loss of his voice would spell the end of his directing career, but he learned to speak with the aid of a device called a Servox and not only continued working but embarked on a second career as a university professor, teaching directing and acting at the University of Houston and Florida State University. In 1995 he donated his collection of papers and theater memorabilia to the library of the University of Houston.

Quintero continued working almost until the end of his life. In the summer of 1996 he directed two early O'Neill plays, *The Long Voyage Home* and *Ile*, at the Provincetown Repertory Theater in Massachusetts.

Quintero died of cancer in New York on February 26, 1999. He was survived by Tsacrios.

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